

MISINTERPRETATIONS OF REAL NEEDS IN SL AND FL WRITING SITUATIONS : IS THERE A NEED TO RE-EVALUATE DIRECTIONS?

Jayakaran Mukundan

University Putra Malaysia

Abstract

Teachers of English in Second language and foreign language situations who teach writing have had to face many challenges, some of which have come about from rapid changes in the teaching of writing in the developed nations. The dilemma that teachers face is a big one – whether to totally embrace the changes (which are advocated by these developed nations as being necessary to achieve better teaching and learning, or to adopt and adapt where necessary. This article provides the over-view of problems faced by writing teachers in SL/FL situations and provides some suggestions as to how teachers can deal with “paradigm shifts” as in the ones that have affected the field of writing.

Keywords: composing, compositions, culture, directions, discourse communities, learning style preferences, misinterpretations, revolution, paradigm shift, process, product, writing

INTRODUCTION

Second Language (SL) and Foreign Language (FL) writing has been largely influenced by developments in developed nations. While most of this research started in 1st language situations, later research focused on non-native speakers (NNS) most of whom were either immigrants or students who had come for studies to these developed countries. What most people (policy makers, curriculum developers, materials developers, school administrators and teachers) do not realize is that most of the findings of research done in such developed nation environments cannot be generalized. EFL and ESL situations outside the developed world are totally different entities. The ESL and EFL situations that exist in the developed world are very unique indeed – most people who are in ESL/EFL situations in these native-speaker (NS) countries are usually students from well-to-do families

from developing countries who have had good opportunities in education (their foundations in education have been well formed) in their home countries. They are also highly motivated individuals who know the importance of being proficient in the English language. All this implies that the focus on SL and FL writing research should have its roots in “ground zero” which is the SL/FL situation in non-native speaker nations. The impact of developed-world ideas in ELT on SL/FL situations is varied. Some have misled teachers into believing that these ideas can be localized and as a result have led to terrible repercussions on learning-teaching situations. Others have brought about a greater awareness of the teaching of writing amongst teachers and have contributed positively to learning and the development of learner writers.

THE TEACHING OF WRITING IN SL/FL SITUATIONS: THE SCENARIO BEFORE THE “REVOLUTION”

When we discuss the recent history of the teaching of writing, most practitioners and teachers would use Maxine Hairston’s “Revolution in the Teaching of Writing” as the basis from which to distinguish past from present. Before the “revolution” which started in the late 1960s, teachers were quite convinced that writing was not teachable, or even if it were then “editing” students work would qualify as teaching. If at all some form of teaching of writing took place in SL/FL situations it would have been in literature classes for Ordinary (O) Level or Advance (A) Level where Literature in English was taught to a “select” group of very proficient near-native speaking students who had to work on developing the skills in writing essays for examinations which demanded a high level of writing proficiency. Students had to work on tasks which required them to make comparisons and contrasts of characters, setting and plots as well as learn effective styles of writing after extensively reading the works of critics. Teachers of literature guided students on styles in argumentation and persuasion and got students to work on aspects of delivery which were closely aligned to the marking schemes of examiners.

In regular English language classrooms in SL/FL situations, writing was hardly taught. While most writing was either “controlled” or “guided”, compositions which were neither guided nor controlled had to be given focus as public examinations emphasized this. Thus, the typical writing class in Malaysia, for instance, was one in which teachers usually wrote a topic on the board and expected learners to write “till the bell rang”. This type of writing, commonly referred to as “timed” writing was a clear example of how ignorant teachers were of approaches to teaching writing. It

also illustrated the domineering influences of the test and the neglect of teaching which results from it.

THE INFLUENCES OF “THE PARADIGM SHIFT” THAT CAME FROM THE REVOLUTION

Most SL and FL teachers of English are eager and quick learners, and as a result of this wonderful characteristic they responded quickly to the developments that led to the “Revolution in the Teaching of Writing”. While there was no real “teaching of writing” in SL/FL situations, sometimes the absence of it brought about the implementation of strategies which in some ways worked better than the “revolutionary” approaches that were offered by developed world ELT. Developed world ELT which fully endorsed the developments that led to the revolution stressed on some ideas which became dogmas. The developments which led to total embracement of ideas sometimes made teachers resemble those with the “enthusiasm of converts”. The main characteristic of writing in the paradigm shift (Hairston, 1982) which heavily influenced writing teachers was the total and unconditional acceptance of process-based writing at the expense of product-based writing.

Process-based writing that was advocated by developed-world ELT was a misfit in SL/FL situations from the very onset of its introduction. The conditions that prevailed in writing classrooms in the developed world were ideal and fulfilling some essential elements crucial for the success of the learning-teaching situation:

Students were placed according to English language or writing proficiency. This made the job of teaching easier (as opposed to situations where there were mixed-ability students).

Writing classes were special sessions within the ELT programme and a minimum of 6 hours a week was spent teaching writing. This gave writing a special focus and demanded learner-investment which eventually helped with aspects such as motivation

At higher levels of instruction writing was a separate component and learners were put through more hours of writing. This made learners prepare themselves for tougher challenges.

Class size was small and hardly exceeded 15 students in a room. Learners had more attention and teachers had less work especially when it came to evaluation.

Writing teachers taught only writing, handled two classes at the most and thus had more time with individual learners. Teachers could thus focus on the major challenge of getting students to write at the level that they are required to.

NNS Learners in developed NS countries were highly motivated – most of them were in these developed countries to pursue tertiary level education. They worked harder than the average student.

The unfortunate thing about the introduction of Process-based approaches in SL/FL situations in NNS nations is that the implementers failed to see the challenges of the local situation. They were in fact oblivious to the lack of sophistication in the learning-teaching situation, something that would contribute immensely to the failure of an approach as complex as the Process Approach. Local situations were unique and no total adoption of developed world ideas would be considered sensible. Some of the characteristics of local SL/FL situations which made Process-based approaches fail were:

There was no streaming of students after placement tests and most classes had mixed-ability students.

Writing classes were usually 80 minute per week with minimal teaching. Timed writing was practiced by the teacher and the product was usually collected at the end of the 80 minutes.

At higher levels of instruction students were usually made to sign up for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) programmes where Academic Writing was one of the courses offered. Students who were not fluent and had barely passed their writing at general proficiency level were subjected to pressure which was excessive.

Class size was large and some classes in primary and secondary school level had up to 45 students. Teachers had very little time for individual attention

Writing teachers taught general English and did not specialize in the teaching of writing.

It was quite clear that the conditions within SL/FL situations made it very difficult for the adoption of Process-based approaches. What was of even more concern was the “turbulence” from the debate on Process Approach in developed-world ELT that was reaching the “new converts” in SL/FL situations and putting them into deeper confusion. While the Process Approach when it began in 1976 with the influences from people like Emig (1971) and Zamel (1976) placed the focus of writing on the “writer”, there emerged after 1986 the view that the focus on the writer and the making of personal meaning was “almost total obsession” (Horowitz, 1986, p. 788). Many teachers and researchers, especially those who worked in tertiary level institutions believed that writers needed to meet the demands of their “discourse communities”. Soon the requirement of learners in tertiary institutions was to be competent in writing in their discourse communities. This brought the focus of Process Writing away from the focus on writer to the focus on “content” and “reader”. While all this seemed to be sensible, especially since the aim of the university is to also prepare their graduates for quick assimilation into jobs within their fields of specialization, many teachers were skeptical of the idea of over-indulgence in this process of “socialization into discourse communities”. These teachers were justified in their lack of confidence in Academic Writing. They believed programmes such as this were ineffective on learners who had not even attained basic proficiency levels in general writing courses. Their view was that with minimal English language competencies, learners will not benefit from English language programmes with heavy “academic” orientations and as such the further building and consolidation of basic communicative competencies will be sacrificed for something which is “utopian” , “Herculean” and impractical.

What sort of realignment in directions should writing teachers think about?

Revolutions can be local and not all of it is applicable globally.

Teachers and researchers need to be aware that the Revolution in the teaching of Writing” that had its roots in the United States was a revolution that took years to mature. And the features that went into the building of the maturity of the revolution were local. It simply meant that local teachers and researchers put local considerations into the agenda. While the revolution itself was “local” and within the American context, there are some features of that famous paradigm shift that could be localized into SL/FL situations and some of which would make writing more “learner-centred”. Some of the ideas which can be adopted from the revolution include the following:

Writing is a recursive process, it is not linear. Pre-writing, writing and revision overlap each other. This is of course an “eye-opener” to teachers everywhere in the world. They must be made aware that there is no single way of writing and the more the teacher is aware of that the better the chances of their student writers having confidence in their writing.

The teaching of strategies for “invention” and “discovery” is possible and this would be a major feature of “pre writing” in writing classes.

The revolution did bring about an awareness that teaching has to be emphasized over testing, hence the movement away from the timed-writing practices of the past. Teachers were also much more aware of the importance of fluency before accuracy and adopted strategies like freewriting and journals from the Expressive School of Writing.

The “cultural attachments” that come with the SL/FL learner must be “noticed”.

The SL/FL situation is very unique and much of the uniqueness comes from the culture of the local situation which is attached to the learner. SL/FL learners differ in terms of learning style-preferences. Even in the Malaysian context, the way in which students of different ethnic groups prefer to learn would differ substantially and a teacher ignorant of this aspect of learning would be quite ineffective, especially if teaching in secondary schools where the students have had primary education in vernacular-type schools. Chinese Malaysian students who have had primary education in Chinese schools and who are later enrolled in mainstream government schools (where they have to mix with other nationalities who have had exposure to the Malaysian national curriculum – one which is influenced by Western curriculums and approaches) would need special attention, especially when it comes to such pre-writing strategies like “group work brainstorm sessions”. Most of these Chinese Malaysian students have never been exposed very much to group learning as they are considered as “studial” (those who prefer to learn from rules), analytical (those who prefer a step-by-step independent approach to solving problems) and “dependent” (those who prefer to learn from the teacher and the book). Group work activities are quite “alien” to these Malaysian Chinese students and they may become “passengers” and passive members of the group. It would be the task of the teacher to then facilitate these groups and slowly immerse these students to the culture of collaborative learning.

What is considered as “traditional” may not be bad after all. Some things that come with the learner are best kept intact and exploited so that positive things can happen.

Some students come with learning cultures which are unique. Students from Chinese and Arabic schools come with years of immersion into rote-learning. This of course is not a weakness but a strength if teachers are open to the suggestion that product-based approaches can be incorporated into process-based ones. These students can be exposed to products of writing (models) and made to write on similar themes. Teachers must realize that there is nothing wrong with working alongside “models” of writing as long as plagiarism is checked from the onset.

When working with learners at different levels of proficiency attainment and different motivation levels, let commonsense prevail over all else.

It is good for a teacher to be informed of all the newest developments (some which are even considered “break-through”) in the teaching of writing, but what is more important for the teacher to keep in mind at all times is that sensibility and common sense must prevail. Teachers are after all mortal and quite incapable of pulling off miracles. They must remember that their learners are also mortals. Teachers must be made aware that writing, especially at lower levels need not focus too much on the processes of “composing”, which is of course a task that puts too many demands on the learner who is facing some of the biggest challenges in the learning of a second or foreign language. What should be emphasized at the beginning should be controlled and guided writing and even if freedom is given to the writer there must be features of “scaffolding” in-built within the tasks so that anxiety would be kept to minimal levels.

Teachers must break free from stereotyping writing tasks. There are no definite number of tasks for writing.

Some writing teachers believe that there are established “modes” of writing and tasks should “fit in” into these modes or genres. This is probably due to the influence of public examinations which project the image that traditional modes of writing are the best means to test writing ability.

Teachers of writing can help learners by not placing one hundred percent focus on test requirements. This would eventually help learners

build confidence gradually and naturally. There are many ways of getting students to engage in writing without forcing them into it all the time. Some of these ways (which involve creativity and need very little coercion) are creative tasks which involve simple poetry. Simple tasks like the development of “The Acrostic” and “Sense Poems” (Manara, 2006) are examples of creative writing that even low level learners are capable of working on.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is to bring about some awareness of developments within the field of teaching of writing and to examine them within the context of the SL/FL situation. The important point that should be emphasized is that writing instruction should not be totally committed to composing alone. SL/FL learners need to be “led” into composing slowly, usually by means of tasks which provide a lot of support. Blind adoption of approaches from developed world situations may prove costly to learners and teachers in the long run. Teachers who blindly adopt unpractical options may find themselves wasting their energies in unproductive pursuits. Learners, on the other hand, may be disillusioned to the extent they may hate all forms of writing in future.

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